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THE PEOPLE'S PALACE.

ON the 14th of May, 1887, the newly built central hall of the People's Palace in East London was opened by the Queen in the midst of an immense concourse of people. The opening of this hall was, in fact, the opening of the People's Palace itself, because, with the aid of temporary buildings and sheds, the scheme of the trustees was immediately commenced, and has been carried on complete in nearly all its parts, though fettered as yet for want of room.

The Palace, as it stands at present, consists only of the temporary sheds and the central hall. Externally, the hall is hideous; but then it is the core of the whole Palace, and its exterior will be invisible when the whole is built. This hall, which is capable of holding 6,000 people at a pinch, is well proportioned and lofty; at one end stands an organ and a platform for the use of the singers and performers at concerts; a spacious gallery is built out on either side; a statue of the Queen stands over the entrance; the sides are adorned with statues of queens and princesses of Great Britain and Ireland; under the gallery are temporary bookshelves, for the hall is at present the library; as well the body of the room is provided with tables and seats for readers and hundreds of papers from all parts of the world; at the upper end under the platform is the table where the librarians—two ladies—sit to advise the readers, to receive and give out the books. The place is always well filled. On Sundays, especially, when the librarian's work is done by volunteers, it is crammed with orderly and quiet readers, who find here a place for rest and reading. The opening of the place on Sunday, although fiercely resisted by local bigots, has proved an unmixed blessing and boon to the people.

At the back of the hall the library is rapidly rising; it will be completed in May or June. It is an octagonal domed room with

book accommodation for 250,000 volumes. At present the library contains no more than 8,000 volumes, but it is rapidly growing. The ante-rooms of the library will be given over entirely for the use of the girls who form the "Lady Members." They will then have all to themselves, under the government of their own committee, their own music room, tea room, reading and writing room, and conversation room.

At the back of the library stands a long two-storied building. This was formerly the dormitory of the school and almshouses which used to occupy the site. Fortunately this block was not pulled down, and it is now, pending the completion of the building, used for class rooms.

The other buildings are a long corrugated iron structure used for the exhibitions; an iron building, which contains a gymnasium perfectly fitted up with all the modern appliances; a billiard room furnished with half a dozen billiard and bagatelle tables in it, and a refreshment room. There are also the secretarial offices, a small "Ladies' Room" fitted up for the girls, and the *Palace Journal* office.

When the whole building is completed, these temporary buildings will disappear. The Palace will contain in itself everything, namely: Social rooms, club rooms, billiard rooms, lecture rooms, reading rooms, apart from the Queen's hall; class rooms, capable of accommodating an immense number of students; chemical and physical laboratories, and all the machinery of a great technical college and palace of delight.

So much for the present condition of the building.

The scheme, which is now almost in full working order, is much more ambitious than its first projectors designed. This is natural where a scheme is really worth anything. It grows and develops, shooting out all kind of unexpected branches. It comprehends a vast school of technical education, in all its branches; a day school for trades; a library and a reading room. This on the solid or educational side. On the other side, every form of recreation that young people may desire is here cultivated and encouraged. I use the word "young" advisably, because it was clearly understood from the outset that whatever good was to be effected by the Palace must be done for and by the young.

The initial difficulty, therefore, was to attract the lads and girls. There were the experiences of other institutions to guide

us on this point. For instance, at the other end of London are two foundations having objects in some respects similar to those of the Palace. One of these has proved a great—a very great success; the other is as conspicuous a failure; to the former the lads resort in ever increasing numbers; to the latter they will hardly go at all. The chief reason is that men considered old by lads of sixteen—say men of thirty; and men considered in decrepitude and advanced age by such lads—say men of forty; men, in fact, of all ages; were admitted to the privileges of the place. Youth will not consort with age; the lads of sixteen refused to sit down in the same rooms with men old enough to be their fathers. With this warning before them, the trustees resolved on making admission to the Palace; first, a privilege which, to be prized at all, must be paid for; and next, a privilege to be limited by age. The members of the Palace must be, therefore, not under fifteen, and not over five and twenty. There was much complaint, at first, from those who were over the age, and it certainly seemed hard that because a man was six and twenty he was to be debarred the use of the Palace. As a matter of fact, however, the members do not, as will be seen, enjoy anything like absolute occupation. These privileges include, (1) Admission to all the concerts, entertainments and exhibitions free of charge. (2) The use of the library in the evenings (this is to be altered into a separate reading room for their use). (3) The use of the gymnasium. (4) The right to join any of the classes at reduced fees. (5) Admission to the club. (6) The right of taking the *Palace Journal* at a reduced rate. For this the lads pay 7s. 6d. a year, and the girls 5s. a year, the former a little more than three half pence a week, the latter about a penny a week. This does not seem a very large sum for all these privileges. As a matter of fact, however, when a young man makes the most of the place, attending one or two of the classes, belonging to one or two of the clubs, and to the gymnasium, he finds himself spending about a shilling a week upon the Palace. If he were not here every night he would spend five times that sum in beer, music halls and theatres for himself and his girl. It is not one of the least advantages of membership, that it separates a lad from the society of his sweetheart while he is at the Palace.

It was estimated that we could accommodate about two thousand members to begin with, six hundred more were afterwards

admitted, another thousand are now about to be admitted. As soon as the lists were opened, the applications crowded in; and the first list was completed in a week; those who came too late and wished to have their names put down on the chance of vacancies were made to pay a registration fee of one shilling. On a recent admission of members, this shilling was spent in giving the newcomers a little social evening, at which Sir Edmund Currie, the director, spoke "straight" to the lads. When all the buildings are up we shall have as many as ten thousand members. Out of the original members about a fourth were girls. As to the social standing of these members, they belong, with the exception of a few clerks, absolutely to the working classes. They are not of the lowest class; that has been thrown in our teeth; if they were they would not stay in so orderly and civilized a place; but they are "respectable." They are of those who work with their hands; both girls and lads. Of the former, there are an immense number, for instance, who are connected with the great Sewing Mystery. They are mostly lads in steady work, and they have a trade; they belong to the "better class" of labor.

As regards the stability of the Palace, that is now, happily, assured. The Charity Commissioners have made it a grant of £4,500 a year; the sum of £12,000, with which the trustees began—it was a bequest from a Mr. Beaumont to be used for purposes of recreation—provides about £400 a year, and the classes and members' fees bring up the income to about £6,500 a year. Out of this the Fabric will have to be maintained, the secretarial staff, the librarians, the service, and the teachers in the school will have to be paid. There is as yet no paid manager. Sir Edmund Currie, the director, to whose exertions the Palace owes everything—absolutely everything—lives on the spot, and gives his whole time and thought to the conduct of the Palace.

Let us, with these preliminary words, sketch out the daily life of the People's Palace, first from the educational point of view, and next from its recreative side.

The boy's school, which is carried on during the day, is an attempt to do something for the boys who have reached the fifth or sixth standard in the board schools—*i. e.*, who have a good rudimentary education and have shown intelligence, and whose parents cannot afford to apprentice them to any trade. We take them for years on their leaving school, and instruct them in trades and in

the principles which underlie all technical teaching. Thus they are not taught anything ornamental or superfluous. There are classes in carpentry, design, geometry, drawing, and chemistry, but none in such superfluities as spelling or French. They come at the age of thirteen or fourteen, and they are to stay for two years, after which they will leave the school to enter upon their trade. The school is at present small and is not regarded with favor by the board schoolmasters, apparently because, if it is successful, it will take all their best boys. This jealousy will, however, die away as the benefits of the school become more known and appreciated by the parents.

The technical schools are carried on in the evening; they may be attended by those who are not members; in fact, some of the members do not attend any of the classes. They comprise "Practical Trade Classes." At present nine trades are taught: "Technical Classes," which include thirteen branches of work; "Science Classes," "Art and Design Classes," "Musical Classes," "Classes for Women," including all sorts of dressmaking, and "General" classes, which include the requirements for the examinations of the Civil Service, shorthand, French and German, book-keeping, and so forth. Only those engaged in the particular trade to which the class refers can join the practical or technical classes. All these classes are full to overflowing.

It will thus be seen that not only does the Palace provide for the East End of London a great university of technical education, but that it is already, after no more than six months, greatly appreciated. A great body of work is now being carried on, but nothing compared with what it will become when our class rooms are all built and are filled to their utmost capacity.

The position of the Palace is, happily, most central as regards the city of East London, for which it was built. It is surrounded by great suburbs, such as Bow, Bromley, Ford, Hackney, Dalston and Bethnal Green; it is accessible by train, tram and omnibus, and it stands in a great thoroughfare; no more convenient site could possibly have been found.

Let us turn to its recreative side. There are, first of all, the exhibitions. Since its opening the Palace has held a Flower Show, a Chrysanthemum Show, an Apprentice's Exhibition, and other shows, and two concerts have been given every week. The exhibitions have been very well attended; the concerts, for which

an admission of two pence is charged, are always crowded. The music given is not of the "music hall" character, but is uniformly good; the "Messiah," for instance, which was lately given—the chorus consisted of the Palace choir—attracted an audience which packed the hall completely. On Sunday mornings, from half past twelve to half past one, an organ recital of sacred music is held, and the hall is filled, chiefly with men who, if they were not there, would be loafing about the streets or in the public-house. The library and reading-room are open every day from 9 A. M. till 10 P. M.; on Sunday the library is open from 2 P. M. till 10 P. M. It is generally filled all the time by men and women who appreciate a warm, well lit, and quiet place. As yet we have no lay student class. They come and read for amusement. Thus, out of 569 books taken out in four days, 448 were works of fiction. The chief favorite is Captain Marryatt. On Sunday the work of superintendence and giving out the books is done by volunteers, chiefly students at the various London colleges. Indeed, there is a great quantity of voluntary work done at the Palace; thus, the exhibitions have been chiefly managed by a generous young Irishman, a Kerry landlord, who gives to the Palace nearly the whole of his time.

The members have started clubs of every kind. These are, of course, managed by themselves. Thus there is a Committee of Management for the billiard room, whose duty it is to see that the tables are not monopolized and that betting is not carried on—betting and gambling are great curses among our young working lads. There are committees and secretaries for the Debating Club, the Chess Club, the Cyclists, the Ramblers, the Harriers, the Cricket, and I know not what else. There is a social room for the lady members, where they can sit and talk, play or read. There is a *Palace Journal*, which records the doings of the club, prints letters from the members, and is intended to serve as their voice and organ. The *Journal* has, of course, a competitive column, and the competition editor has no easy task.

Lastly, an experiment was made at the New Year which proved so successful that there is no doubt it will be repeated. For many years the public dancing rooms have fallen into such bad odor that one after the other they have all been closed. There is now, I believe, not a single place in all London where a respectable girl—or, indeed one who cannot claim that title—can

go for a dance. Under the evangelical rule of fifty years ago, the clergy set their faces dead against dancing. Most nonconformists still do so. The magistrates steadfastly refuse dancing licenses. But a change is coming over our views. We have happily learned to distinguish. Not dancing, but the abuse of dancing places, is the vice; dancing itself is the most innocent, as it is also the most delightful of all amusements. We have only to go to Germany to understand that. Until the last century, which was a time when nearly everything was brutal, dancing was the most popular form of recreation. We have therefore taken a step toward the restoration of dancing to the amusement of the people. There have been four balls held at the Palace. The lady members were invited to bring their brothers and friends, and dancing to the band of the Scots Greys was carried on from seven to eleven. It was an experiment attended with some anxiety; but the girls themselves knew that future dances depended on the success of these, and that there were outside bigots and fanatics ready enough to cry out upon the wickedness of the trustees in allowing the dance and the dreadful things it would lead to. The result was that no court ball could have been conducted with greater decorum. Court balls, however, are said to be dull things; no West End ball, however spirited, could have been more delightful to everybody concerned. There was no supper, but there was a refreshment room, where things could be procured at a most reasonable rate. And the question now is not "Shall a dance be held?" but "When shall we have another? and how shall the lads be taught to dance better?" because, as always happens, it was found that the young men were far behind the girls in dancing.

I have to add that no intoxicants are permitted to be sold in the Palace. At first, some of the trustees were against this rule, because they would have the members themselves insist upon temperance. But their views are now changed. In a great place where thousands of young people congregate every evening it is well that no temptation should be thrown in their way. Outside, there are public houses in plenty; within the Palace one can take any kind of meal, but strong drink one cannot have.

There is growing up in the place among the members a strong and wholesome corporate life. Friendships are made which will be life long; the lads are finding out each other as young men do at Oxford or Cambridge. Already they like better to be boxing

and cudgel playing in the gymnasium, or running with the harriers, than walking up and down the street with a girl ; already they are beginning to understand that social life which they have never before had the chance of enjoying. The clubs are doing this, mainly ; the *Journal* tries to help. Already the People's Palace Choir is singing for the people ; soon there will be a palace orchestra playing for them. We look for the development of artistic genius and the exhibition of East End painters. Next winter there will be, I hope, many dances. New clubs and associations are continually being formed, and only yesterday I heard that some of them were asking when we are going to start a dramatic school.

Above all and before all, it is endeavored to make the members understand that everything that is done in and for the place must be supported and carried through by the people for the people. Their own choir and band will sing and play at their own concerts ; they will organize their own dances ; they will carry on their own clubs ; they will act their own plays ; they will send forth their own artists, trained within the palace walls in every kind of art ; they will send out skilled workmen ready to support the good old name of the good old country against all comers.

WALTER BESANT.